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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 001014

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/23/2017
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SUBJECT: MORE RCTV SOLIDARITY MARCHES AS MAY 28 APPROACHES

REF: CARACAS 00990

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Radio Caracas Television (RCTV) supporters took to the streets once again May 19 to protest the BRV's decision to revoke the broadcasting license of Venezuela's oldest and most popular television network, making it the largest demonstration since the December 2006 elections. Separately, local journalists marched May 21 to the Caracas offices of the OAS and EU, carrying a kilometer-long banner reading "Freedom of Expression" in ten languages. More RCTV solidarity marches are scheduled in Caracas and across the country as RCTV reaches endgame. The BRV is gearing up to launch "Teves," the "public service" station slated to replace RCTV, and named its president and executive board. Despite RCTV's pending legal case in the Supreme Court (TSJ), BRV officials continue to assert that the closure is a done deal. The TSJ agreed May 23 to review the legality of the closure, but noted that it will not provide RCTV with judicial relief if the court does not rule on the case before May 28. Chavez' recent announcement that the closure will proceed as planned makes it highly unlikely that the TSJ will rule in RCTV's favor. End Summary.

Best turnout yet

¶2. (C) RCTV supporters participated in a solidarity march May 19, the largest showing of support for the network to date. Post estimates between 10-20 thousand supporters participated. As in previous marches, a diverse group of over 25 civil society organizations and opposition political parties organized the event, including Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT), Primero Justicia (PJ), COPEI, Accion Democratica (AD), and the National Resistance Movement (CNR). Local entertainment personalities were on-hand for the event in an effort to generate additional interest. Participants convened at four starting points in Caracas, and the march ended without incident in the upper middle class neighborhood of Chacaito. Union banners and political signs for the PJ and left-wing Bandera Roja were most evident. The BRV and local Chacao municipality deployed a significant number of police personnel to ensure a peaceful event. BRV-controlled metropolitan police reportedly interfered with marchers at at least one location.

¶3. (SBU) Zulia state governor and former presidential

candidate Manuel Rosales attended the May 19 demonstration and addressed the crowd. Rosales said the Venezuelan people are anxiously awaiting a ruling by the Political and Administrative Chamber of the Supreme Court (TSJ) on the legality of the BRV's decision to revoke RCTV's license (reftel). "If the TSJ does not act, it will serve as a testament to the lack of separation of powers and justice that exists (in Venezuela)," Rosales told the media before the march commenced.

¶4. (U) Parallel pro-government demonstrations did not take place as expected, although a small pro-government car caravan expressing support for RCTV's upcoming closure was organized May 20. Separately, the CNR, which has often taken the lead in the marches, plans to convoke additional demonstrations on May 26 and 27, the latter to the Ministry of Telecommunications' (CONATEL,s) headquarters.

Longest Banner in Latin America

¶5. (U) Local journalists and RCTV supporters marched to the Caracas offices of the OAS and EU May 21 carrying a kilometer-long banner reading "Freedom of Expression" in ten languages, reportedly the largest such banner in Latin America. Journalists presented a ten-page document documenting their concerns over freedom of expression in Venezuela to the OAS and EU diplomats. They also asked that both international bodies "remain vigilant" and "give greater attention" to the government's efforts to stifle media pluralism.

Teves President and Board Named

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¶6. (SBU) As the May 28 closure date approaches, the BRV is preparing to launch "Teves," the BRV's new "public service" television station slated to replace RCTV. During a three-hour speech May 18 to inaugurate a government-sponsored communications conference, President Chavez named local music critic Lil Rodriguez as the station's new president. In total disregard of RCTV's pending legal case with the TSJ,s Political and Administrative Chamber or any pretense of judicial independence, Chavez said the only way the concession would not be revoked "is if (he) ceased being the president of Venezuela." Lil Rodriguez writes a salsa music column in "Ultimas Noticias" and has a music-related television program that airs on Telesur. She previously had a radio program in Havana.

¶7. (SBU) Vice President Jorge Rodriguez swore in "Teves'" three-member executive board and five alternates in a May 21 public ceremony, less than a week before the new station is scheduled to air. The board reports to the Ministry of Popular Power for Communications and was issued a USD 4 million budget to begin operating, although the station is supposed to become self-sufficient. "Teves" President Lil Rodriguez said the station's programming will be different from that of other pro-government stations because "we don't want 'Teves' to be boring." Lil Rodriguez previewed some of "Teves'" upcoming shows, including cooking, musical, and sports-related programs, plus rights to the 2007 Copa America soccer tournament in Venezuela. She also asserted that "Teves" has the capacity to run 24 hours a day without the need to broadcast re-runs. She confirmed Telecommunications Minister Jesse Chacon's May 18 statement that Teves will not have nationwide coverage on May 28. Instead, the "public service" station will only be available in Caracas and Maracaibo.

TSJ Chamber to Admit RCTV Case

¶8. The TSJ's Political and Administrative Chamber issued a statement May 23 on RCTV's pending pleas with the court. The Chamber announced it will review RCTV's request to abrogate the BRV's decision to not renew the license. The court, however, will not issue a stay or provide judicial relief for the station if it does not rule on the case before May 28.

BRV on the Defensive

¶9. (SBU) BRV officials continued their efforts to deflect international criticism regarding RCTV's closure. Vice President of the National Assembly Desiree Santos reportedly met May 18 with reporters, representatives from Freedom House, and members of Congress in Washington to discuss RCTV's case and the BRV's efforts to "democratize" the media. Vice President Rodriguez lamely asserted May 21 that freedom of expression will be expanded by RCTV's closure. Separately, Government-run television stations are running numerous ads and programs defending the BRV's decision to close RCTV (reftel). President of the National Assembly (NA) Cilia Flores announced May 22 that the NA plans to draft and pass a resolution May 24 supporting Chavez' anti-RCTV position,

Seeing Fireworks

¶10. (U) Opposition Labor leader Froilan Barrios accused the directors of Pequiven, a dependency of the state oil company PDVSA, of coercing workers into purchasing and setting off fireworks to celebrate RCTV's closure May 28. Pequiven reportedly plans to deduct a portion of the company's 3,500 workers' salary to purchase and distribute the fireworks. Barrios said the majority of the workers do not support the move, but will probably comply, fearing reprisal. He believes it is likely other PDVSA dependencies and workers are being pressured into supporting the government's decision to revoke RCTV's broadcasting license.

Comment

¶11. (C) RCTV supporters produced a respectable show of popular support March 19 and among journalists on May 21, the

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largest opposition demonstrations since the December 2006 elections. That said, many Venezuelans are either too resigned or intimidated to protest the coming closure. To date, freedom of expression does not appear to be an issue that is resonating among the general population. Journalists and international media watchdogs have attempted to raise public awareness, with few tangible results, beyond widespread disappointment over RCTV's future as registered by opinion polls.

¶12. (C) Chavez' recent declarations that the RCTV closure will proceed as planned conflict with the BRV's recent efforts to justify its anti-RCTV stance through a more measured public relations blitz. Chavez' outburst serves as a reminder that he is personally invested in RCTV's closure.

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